

Return to B. Smith Haworth

Glimpses of the Past-A Capsule History of O. U.

By Prof. B. Smith Haworth

We asked B. Smith Haworth to write for TAUY TALK a brief account of O.U. history. That is no easy task. But since he is now completing an extensive history of the college, he condensed some pertinent facts for alumni readers.

A "capsule" history of Ottawa University, such as this, is not easy, for a hundred years is a long time through the bifocals of the present. What to leave out is so great a problem, I must leave out any further words about it.

Certainly, Jotham Meeker has a place in the story. It was he who from 1833 to 1855 pioneered in Christian education and in printing in what was then an unorganized wilderness. He knew Taury Jones better than anybody and must have had a great influence on this strange man.

For Taury Jones is an enigma. Interpreter, preacher, real estate promoter, he must have given much of the early impetus for the grant of land by the Ottawa Indians which caused the college to take root. Though it must be said that the root was in shallow ground. The twenty thousand and more acres given or sold by the Ottawas in 1862 simply did not become, as seemed so likely, the endowment needed and desired. The details are too many and complex to list here.

It was Robert Atkinson and M. L. Ward who took over in 1868 and 1869 and inspired enough Baptist support to erect a building and save the enterprise when politics, land speculation, and doubtful bookkeeping had, in 1872, brought Congress to the verge of destroying the Indian endowment altogether.

Dr. Ward from 1883 to 1905 was, at one time or another, president, instructor, student enlistment director, and crusader both for

scholastic standards and for social righteousness. The fire of 1902 hardly "fazed" him. "Get your lessons," he told a group huddled in the old gymnasium the morning after the fire, "they won't burn." That remark represented the M. L. Ward type of leadership.

There were fires, three of them. The first in the original building in 1875, the second, the newly completed "ad" building in 1902, and the last, the gymnasium in 1945. Always after such a disaster there was new vision, added support and a drive to go ahead. It is not quite certain who said "you can't burn out a college," but it expresses well the spirit which has motivated Ottawa University all along.

The Indian experiment did not last; what was attempted in the early years was a program for white students, partly elementary, partly secondary. It was not until 1886 that a four-year college graduate could be listed on the records. Growth was slow, even after that, but it was consistent.

Dr. J. D. S. Riggs, President from 1895 to 1906, had the unenviable task of raising money to rebuild the building destroyed in 1902. He pleaded vigorously with John D. Rockefeller for funds and when \$25,000 was finally forthcoming, the whole Ottawa community felt success had come at last.

When Dr. S. E. Price completed eighteen years of leadership in 1924, the evidences of progress were clear for all to see. Buildings included the Student Building, Ward Science Hall, and the restoration of Taury Jones Hall. Endowment was increased noticeably. It was still difficult to obtain students but more were coming and beyond all that a war had come and gone, and apparently only peace and prosperity lay ahead.

But there were storms ahead. Inflation, uncertainty, and the new social moods of the twenties were to be followed by depression and business stagnation in the thirties.

Heroic endeavors by Dr. W. P. Behan and his loyal staff kept the college ship afloat. Among important developments, the Alumni Association was reorganized and reactivated.

In 1935, Dr. Andrew B. Martin came upon the Ottawa scene. Revolutionary developments have characterized his record breaking administration. Finances have been stabilized, new buildings constructed and the curriculum has been revised and given a new functional emphasis.

What of student life? In early days the great emphasis was upon debate and oratory. Athletics were definitely second both in prestige and attention. The Word and Way in a memorial edition to Ottawa University in 1900 gave columns to speech activities but gave not a word to athletics. Athletics, indeed, were, until about 1900, largely conducted outside the college administration. Of course, there would come a time when to "Bust Baker" would be the highest possible achievement — and when championship teams, as in the thirties and forties, became almost as commonplace as the dandelions that bloom in the spring. But in the earlier days, literary societies occupied the center of the stage and must be rated of first importance both socially and intellectually. The Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A. for a long term of years also occupied a central spot in student life. Meetings, evangelistic campaigns, gospel teams, Bible study groups, when taken together made the greatest of all the demands upon student energy and time.

Inevitably disintegration and change walk the campus. Organi-

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zations like those mentioned and many others flourish and disappear. Social clubs are strong and weak depending upon leadership and the pressures which are put upon them. Wars disturb the routine and may as in 1918, temporarily dislocate the entire program or as in 1942, almost completely eliminate boys from the student body.

Nevertheless, the light that began in 1867 to shine in the darkness has never been put out. For in matters of great concern, plans never fail to be forthcoming. Lately, administrative dreams for a more adequate general education have been projected into study and actual experimentation. The Resources Association has been established that gifts might be more easily secured and allocated. The hopes centered so long in a library are about to be consummated, and new dormitories seem likely to secure the "residential college" President Martin and others have so long desired.

The old second floor clock still rings classes in and out; countless feet continue to trudge the stairways; the objectives being too varied to analyze. The comment of an "ancient" yearbook, "there are no joints in the city, but lots of splices are made each year," is abundantly true, at least, in the second part. The dome is not painted as frequently as in earlier years, but the painting continues to be highly original, if not artistic. The chicken fry or scrap, whichever it may be, has been partially "civilized" but old traditions seldom completely fade away.

All a capsule historian dares to say in any finality in the face of all of this is that here, for nearly a hundred years, life has been encountered and here personality increases in stature.
